

1945: Germany's futile struggle for time and against marked cards A) Was the second catastrophic shattering of the Wehrmacht in the central section artificially encouraged? Why did the winter catastrophe on the Vistula lead to draconian punishments for lies and false reports? On January 12, 1945, about 200 km east of the German Reich border on the Vistula began the "Great Winter Battle in the East," as the German press called it at the time. It led to the complete defeat of >Heeresgruppe A< as a result of the collapse of the 4th Panzer Army and the 9th Army. Not entirely without reason, people wondered at the time, and for decades after the war, how it was possible that the German army, which had proven itself time and again over the course of five years of war, could completely and so catastrophically collapse on the Vistula front in just a few days. This defeat at the Vistula was, after the artificially initiated collapse of the "Heeresgruppe Mitte< in the summer of 1944, the second strategically decisive destruction blow against Germany in the East. The German defeat at the Vistula opened the way to the west for the Soviet shock armies. It ended only in the Silesian mountains, in northern Bohemia, Saxony as well as on the Elbe with the unconditional surrender of the Wehrmacht on May 8/9, 1945. After the stabilization of the Eastern Front in the fall of 1944, Hitler had assumed that the war would last seven years. General Jodl's Wehrmacht command staff had provided him with a new plan for averting an earlier German defeat. By weakening the Western Front to the utmost extent still justifiable, an offensive army was to be built up in the East before the end of 1945 after a success of the Ardennes Offensive, which was to throw the Russians back. In the west, with the offensives in the Ardennes and in northern Alsace in December 1944, the initiative had passed back to Germany in a complete surprise to the Allies. The German leadership hoped that its counterattacks in the west would present the Americans and British with insurmountable domestic problems, with the goal of withdrawal from Western Europe. Field Marshal Keitel had promised Hitler to raise half a million new German soldiers by February 1945. By summer, the underground hydrogenation plants were also finally to supply sufficient fuel. The time thus gained would probably have been sufficient to enable Germany's wonder weapons to be put into action. All these hopes were dashed by the successful Russian offensive on the Vistula. In fact, the large-scale attack under the Soviet name >Vistula-Oder-Operation< was hastily and improvised by the Russians. Soviet troops lacked trained soldiers, and all too many divisions were below target strength. Soviet superiority over the Germans in the technical field, however, was 7:1 in tanks and 20:1 in airpower and artillery to the disadvantage of the Wehrmacht. Nevertheless, the Russians took a great risk. This was reported by SS-Obersturmbannführer Otto Skorzeny, whose >Jagdverband Ost< was able to conduct numerous missions behind Soviet lines for reconnaissance. According to Skorzeny, the Soviets at that time were exclusively focused on "offensive at any cost." This would have meant a great risk for them, since their supply lines were expanding more and more. Skorzeny concluded, "No doubt about it! If the Battle of the Bulge had been launched in November, as Hitler originally intended, and not in December, and if it had succeeded, the Western Front would have been stabilized at least until April. If Stalin had then attacked on January 12 as recklessly as he did, his offensive could have come to a bad end." Stalin was afraid that the Western powers would be in Berlin before the Red Army. However, he desperately wanted to win the feared race to Berlin so that he could grab the nearby German atomic bomb laboratories and experimental facilities there, along with uranium stockpiles, before the United States did. Therefore Stalin cut the time schedule of the operation considerably, so that the city would be conquered by Soviet tanks for sure.¹² Again numerous peculiarities occurred on the German side, which made the Russian success possible in the first place. These included an incredible overestimation of German fighting strength on the part of the German High Command. On January 9, 1945, Hitler told Chief of Staff General Guderian: "The Eastern Front has never had so many reserves as now. This is to your credit. I thank you for it." This misconception was based on false information about Hitler's own troop strength in the east, which was systematically

presented to him.³ While he was brazenly lied to that the German eastern front had the same strength as in June 1941, artillery corps had been raised that actually had only the strength of brigades, and armored brigades as strong as a regiment. Even the new tank destroyer brigades consisted of only one division. In addition to this lying and deception of Wehrmacht reporting, German intelligence also failed again. For example, on December 5, 1944, General Gehlen's Division >Foreign Armies East<, while assuming a center of gravity in the Baranow bridgehead on the Vistula, had primarily anticipated a second attack on both sides of the Carpathians on Upper Silesia and Vienna, as well as predicting a third attack that would serve to take away East and West Prussia. Hitler knew, however, that Stalin was obviously preparing his major attack in the Vistula bridgeheads. Gehlen also underestimated the total number of Russian offensive units in the Vistula bridgeheads by 30 to 40 percent.⁴ Instead, Soviet diversionary tactics and the artful concealment of Red Army regroupments before the attack were intended to focus German attention on the region south of the Vistula. For this purpose, the Soviets had set up 320 dismountable mockups of the T-34 tank and 250 truck mockups, as well as 600 artificial guns. German reconnaissance troops had demonstrably discovered the false positions and brought back photographs. The German High Command, however, did not react to these findings, but shelled the artificial dummies with artillery and moved reinforcements to the non-threatened front bridgeheads. Were they going to be fooled again? As before the summer offensive of 1944, the German troops had long since recognized the enormous scale of the Soviet attack preparations. All Soviet large tank formations as well as the mass of the rifle armies that attacked the Vistula in mid-January 1945 and smashed the German eastern front were known to the Germans and had been reported time and again. German air reconnaissance also reported large-scale feeds of Russian reinforcements into the Vistula bridgeheads. By January 11, 1945, indications of the imminence of the major Russian attack had already begun to accumulate. Radio transmissions, prisoners, and defectors provided the most accurate information about the location and timing of the Russian attack. This was true for Baranow as well as for the even more dangerous bridgehead of Magnuszew. When on January 12, 1945, the first blow fell nevertheless woolly surprising< for the German leadership, General Gehlen reacted three days after the beginning of the Russian offensive with a retrospective correction of his erroneous prognoses: "The first three days of the Soviet final offensive have fully confirmed the previous findings about the enemy's intentions in all points. Force deployment and operational directions correspond without exception to the information supplied by front-line reconnaissance." Gehlen lied that he had recognized the Soviet operation in advance, and saw to it that this false claim was disseminated by his friends at the Army High Command. Copies of his analysis, for example, were given in circulation to the Group Leaders I of the Operations Division, who acknowledged knowledge of it by signing their names on January 16, 1945.¹ As in the summer of 1944, it was true that the Soviet intentions of January 1945 were apparently misjudged in the extent and scope of their aim, contrary to the troops' constant warning calls. It was conspicuous that the Luftwaffe, despite the accurate results of its reconnaissance units, again found itself unable to fight the detected enemy buildup from the air. In the bridgeheads, which were crammed with material and personnel, every bomb would have been a direct hit. In response to Minister Dr. Goebbels' later accusation that nothing had been done, the Luftwaffe tried to justify itself afterwards by saying that, on the one hand, it had too little fuel and fighter planes available and that, on the other hand, the weather conditions had made the operation difficult. The misrecognition of Russian attack intentions from the Vistula bridgeheads led to the fact that >Heeresgruppe A< not only did not receive reinforcements in time, but still in early January 1945 had to surrender a total of five armored formations to Hungary and the Western Front! Again a parallel to >Bagration<! A little help was provided by various temporary measures such as redeployments, reorganizations, and refreshments. The whole thing was made worse by supply failures. Misdirected ammunition resupply or ammunition resupply that was incorrect in varieties

worsened the artillery resupply situation to a considerable extent. In addition, fuel was not distributed to the units in a timely manner, but was centrally managed and withheld in the rear because of >extreme economy. This turned out to be a disaster after the beginning of the Russian offensive, because a forwarding of the available precious material was no longer possible due to the battle situation, since the enemy either dominated the roads or had already occupied the storage positions. This withholding of vital fuel for tanks, tractor units and infantry fighting vehicles, justified to the outside world as >extreme economy, was reminiscent of the withdrawal of ammunition from the Atlantic Wall shortly before the start of the Allied landings. Again, those responsible were never revealed. The German defenders had months to prepare for the coming Russian Vistula offensive with thorough position building.

After thoroughly analyzing the most modern Russian attack method, the technique had been perfected to bring the enemy's major onslaught to a standstill through a deeply staggered network of positions. In this context, the so-called >Großkampfbzone<, which represented the last most modern phase in the improvement of German defensive tactics, was developed on the basis of a procedure used in the First World War. For this purpose, a well thought-out position system of a so-called >Großkampf-HKL< had been developed. Its main purpose was to evade the dreaded destructive fire of Russian artillery and Stalin's organs and to wear down the enemy attacking units in the depth of the battlefield. The positional force had been trained in large-scale combat and relied on the value of these positions and the armored reserves behind them. Even though these were weakened by withdrawals, the remaining vehicles featured the best Germany could muster at the time, including "Königstiger*", "Panther*" and "Hetzer*". Curiously, the precisely rehearsed procedure of the large-scale combat zone on the Vistula was not applied. Although the Soviet major attack was expected to occur on the night of January 12, 1945, based on the situation assessment by "Army Group A*", Panzer Army High Command 4 failed to authorize the 48th Panzer Corps to move into the major combat line in time, since the major attack was not expected to occur on January 12 and, on the other hand, the most favorable time for triggering the dismount movement was allegedly missed.¹ In fact, there would have been ample time to implement the planned and rehearsed concept of moving out to the rear position some 4.5 to 9 km behind the HKL, while several barred and intermediate positions had been completed in the intermediate area. Thus, the opportunity was lost to have the front line garrison move out to the protective positions in time before the Soviet preparatory fire began. Of course, the Germans had enough time, for example, to preemptively initiate combined fire attacks on ready Russian infantry formations and artillery positions at the 4th Infantry Division after knowing about the Soviet attack preparations. According to intercepted radio messages, this fire must have had a not inconsiderable effect. As a result, the German infantry and stationary antitank artillery ordered into the HKL by its leadership suffered such heavy losses as expected from the Soviet destructive fire that the main battlefield no longer had any significant garrisons. The artillery and launcher units of the Wehrmacht and β, thus inadequately secured, suffered terrible losses as a result, while the operational reserves were just sufficient to absorb the retreating remnants of the emplacement divisions and to delay the Soviet advance in a mobile manner for some time. Incredibly, the calculated six hours to draw the major battle line had not been taken up the night before the major enemy attack. Nevertheless, the Russians suffered terrible, even devastating losses in the fire of the surviving German defensive guns. Curiously, later Soviet literature was silent about this!¹ Although the Russians had the most accurate maps of the German positions as well as knowledge of tactical details of the opposing Germans, Soviet tank losses were so great that, according to Baranov, their tanks acquired the attribute of a >consumable device*. Only with enough fresh tank units could the advance be kept flowing. Now that the Russian offensive had eaten its way through the German front-line positions, the hour should have come for the

operational reserves to help attack and defeat the enemy tanks and motorized formations that were breaking through. The goal was to cut off the head of the Soviet advance by a well-prepared counterattack on both sides. In fact, one of the largest duels of armored forces since the Battle of Kursk took place in the snowy forests of Poland in January 1945. This time, too, the cards were stacked. The German formation that was to carry out this battle-decisive attack was the 24th Panzer Corps under General of the Panzer Group Walter Nehring. It consisted of the 16th and 17th Panzer Divisions and the 20th Panzer Grenadier Division. Together, this force had 250 tanks and assault guns, including a battalion of 60 >Panther* Pan- zers. In addition, there was the heavy tank battalion 424. With 45 King Tigers* and a number of other >Tiger I< tanks, it represented one of the strongest German units on the Eastern Front.²⁻³ The German tank units were carefully prepared for what was to come. The >Panther* battalion of the 17th Panzer Division had even planned and prepared joint air-to-ground actions with the Luftwaffe's Henschel HS-129 tank destroyers.⁴ Things were to turn out differently! In early January 1945, the German tank reserves in front of the Baranow bridgehead suddenly had to abandon their very good, developed defensive positions and move further forward into unprotected terrain. There they were to erect wooden protective boxes near the front and wait for the coming events. The heavy armored division 424 even had to move further south into a completely unknown terrain, interspersed with swamps and numerous water courses. The men of Heavy Armored Division 424 could find no explanation as to why they, as the corps fire department, suddenly had to take up position in completely unsuitable terrain directly behind the front. For them it was absolutely clear that it was sabotage. According to the commanding general of the 17th Panzer Division, the orders allegedly came from Hitler. It was never proved! Strangely, the German tank reserves were half dug in in their pit positions as ordered, but some had their batteries removed. Many were not refueled because their fuel had to be stored in the rear! When the major Russian attack began on January 12, 1945, the 24th Panzer Corps was put on alert. Then nothing happened. No attack orders reached the divisions during the entire first day, when it would have just mattered. Instead, quite a few German tanks were caught in the Russian preparatory artillery fire and destroyed, including almost all of the >Panthers<. Only sporadically did parts of the German tanks attack Soviet T-34s and >Stalin< tanks, without the Germans having received operational orders by then. The Soviets pushed far past the German tanks to the rear, sometimes targeting the supply units of the German armored divisions. As a result of the inactivity of the German reserves, the Soviets were already able to advance 15 kilometers undisturbed that day. It was not until after dark that the German armored divisions received their deployment orders. Much too late, since the Soviets had already broken through between the ready areas, making a closed deployment of the 24th Panzer Corps impossible. With still no deployment orders by nightfall, the commander of Heavy Armored Division 424, Major Saemisch, personally drove to the 16th Panzer Division and was given orders to recapture the lost division command post the next morning. This attack the next morning began very successfully at first, but then had to be broken off after great casualties, as the village of Lisow was now given as a new target. The attack was supposed to be part of a German tank attack in the direction of Kielce. In fact, dug-in Soviet T-34s, ISU-100s, and >Stalin< tanks were already waiting at Lisow. Although individual >Kö- nigstiger< could shoot down twenty Soviet tanks each, the tank battalion at Lisow was shot down at close range by Soviet tanks and Paks. It seems virtually certain that the Soviets were aware of the planned deployment of Heavy Tank Battalion 424 and were able to lay an ambush at their leisure. Without support from the >King Tigers<, the advance of the remaining German tanks to Kielce was doomed to failure. Also important to the failure of the German counterattacks was the lack of radio communication with the tank reserves. Why this had been down for so long remained unexplained to this day. With FUG- 8 and FUG-12 equipment, the German tanks on the ground had excellent radio equipment at their disposal that had a range of

between 48 and 80 kilometers. The General of the German Intelligence Corps, Albert Praun, was therefore later given the task of having this strange failure clarified by his radio advisors.¹ The investigation proceeded >without result^ Praun gave a helpless explanation in his later postwar memoirs that one probably "did not yet know how to handle shortwave properly . . . The operation of Jagdpanzerkompanie 1168 on January 12, 1945, on the other hand, had proved how important correct operational orders at the right time were. Tank Company 1168 had not fully recovered from a poison attack in which rat poison had been administered in potato salad during the New Year's Day holiday meal. At 2 o'clock noon, at the decisive moment of the Russian offensive, Company 1168, equipped with >Hetzer< fighter tanks, attacked the Soviet breakthrough troops with mounted infantry and held the line all day without difficulty. Only when a cutoff threatened did the >Hetzer< have to withdraw under cover of darkness. The 24th Panzer Corps could have found a similar successful use. On January 16, 1945, after three days of confused fighting, the German mobile reserves behind the Baranov Bridgehead were shattered. The surviving parts had to fight their way westward in the wandering >NEHRING< cauldron. For days after the start of the major offensive, the German leadership remained in the dark about the real situation. Instead,

systematic false reports paralyzed German countermeasures, and panic reports created confusion. On January 20, 1945, at the >Führerlage<, Hitler wanted to know why the Eastern Front could collapse within a few days—as it had in the summer of 1944—and demanded an investigation. General Praun's mission may also have fallen into this context. A day later, Hitler issued instructions to all officers in command posts that any report to him must contain only the "unvarnished truth." Otherwise he threatened with draconian punishment.¹ The constant lying had to stop at last!

How else could one's own measures be planned? Interestingly, the stenograms of the daily situation meetings of those decisive days from January 16 to January 26, 1945, have been lost until today. That they were dramatic, however, should be clear. Hitler was furious shortly thereafter that the panzer reserves deployed in advance of the correctly identified enemy attack center of gravity did not receive their attack order in time and were thus washed over by the Russian tide that had broken through. He had the commander-in-chief of >Heeresgruppe Mitte<, Colonel General Harpe, relieved immediately. Harpe had previously driven under greatest danger at the beginning of the Russian offensive in an open passenger car into the area threatened by Soviet tanks in order to find in vain his tank troops, which could not be reached by radio. The adjutant of Grand Admiral Dönitz, Walter Lüdde-Neurath, witnessed in the anteroom of the Führer's room when Harpe subsequently arrived for the ordered report after his recall. Harpe presented Hitler with a "Führer order" sent to him by telex, according to which Hitler had expressly reserved for himself the use of the armored divisions in question. The order, which Hitler did not know existed, had been given by the Army General Staff, which was in charge of operations on the Eastern Front. Hitler, according to Lüdde-Neurath, could just once again be appeased that this was apparently an >oversight<, not treason.¹ Once again, the gentlemen concerned were able to get their heads out of the noose without being recognized. So it was not only due to Russian superiority that the Soviet victory at Baranov became within a few days the complete second great catastrophe of the German Eastern Army. The next blow against the German Vistula front was to be delivered a few days later, on January 14, from the Pulawy bridgehead. Hitler's concept of "strike in the west and hold in the east" had been foiled by the Russians with the help of German traitors. Pulawy bridgehead and the >tiger's grave< on the Vistula: Was the gate to the Oder artificially opened for the Soviets? Two days after the events at Baranov, the 1st Belorussian Front made a complete breakthrough through the Eastern Front, north of Baranov. Allegedly, the German enemy situation assessors had completely failed to realize that this main thrust of the Russians would take place there. In fact, however, both the German aerial photographs and the intelligence reconnaissance companies on the

ground had a clear view of the impending danger. While the Soviets set about violently smashing the German front in front of the Pulawy bridgehead, Colonel Paul Arnhold, Pionierführer of the LVI Panzer Corps, had prepared a deadly blockade for the Russians at Zwol- len. Zwolien, as a transportation hub, was key to preventing any Soviet breakout at Pulawy. Five main roads met in the town, the most important of which ran west of the town to Radom. Arnhold's sappers had laid 20,000 mines around Zwolien. Assault guns were dug in along the approaches to the city. Pak guns had been fixed in concrete emplacements at road junctions. Two dozen miles to the rear on call should have lurked >Kingtiger<. The fuel for this reserve of tanks, however, was still stored in depots in the rear, although the Russian major attack was all but certain!1 Thus the 51 >Tigers< of Division 507 were scattered piecemeal across the front and even then hampered by massive fuel shortages. Arnhold recalled that the >Tigers< of Abteilung 507 formed the steel skeleton of the Vistula front, but only a stationary solid one. After they had used up all their ammunition and their turrets could no longer be moved, Arnhold said in the aftermath of the war, the crews were left only with the option of blowing up their valuable tanks by blowing themselves up. On January 14, 1945, however, assault guns and >Ti- ger< destroyed the Russian tanks one by one. The terrain had been perfectly surveyed in advance, and it resembled target shooting. Thus, the Zwolien base easily withstood the Russian attack for 24 hours. Heavy Panzer Division 507 shot down 66 Russian tanks over two days without any casualties of its own. In cooperation with the 7th Infantry Division, the division recaptured the old main battle line, and even on the third day 507 held out against Marshal Rokossowski's massed assault force and air strikes. With a loss of 4 >King's Tigers<, the division shot down another 96 Russian tanks.2'3 It was not, however, massive numerical inferiority and lack of fuel or ammunition that were to cause the fall of the Zwollen base. In fact, some assault guns had been ordered to abandon their dug-in positions and open a line for the supposed retreat of German troops retreating from the Pulawy bridgehead area. The mines were also dealt with accordingly. Arnhold's sappers were to close the gap thus created by the minefield again after the last German vehicles had passed from the Pulawy bridgehead. In fact, however, under cover of smoke and artificial fog over the battlefield at night, it was not German tanks but Russian T-34s that came slipping through the artificially cleared gap, followed by mounted infantry holding the resulting free gap open. The result of this artificially forced opening of the front was, as Paul Arnhold recalled in the postwar period, indescribable chaos that led to the fall of the Zwollen base. The Russian success led to the collapse of the front of the LVI Panzer Corps. It was of no use that 245 Russian tanks were destroyed at Zwollen in a single day. During the retreat, 19 >Königstiger< of Division 507 were also lost, since the rapidly advancing Russian tanks prevented refueling with the fuel supplies that had now finally made it to the front. 22 >Königstiger< could just escape the inferno and were marched in the direction of Graudenz, since there had been a suitable place to cross over to the west bank of the Vistula. Here began a catastrophe that none of the >Tiger< soldiers should ever forget. The rear command had omitted to provide even one of the available armored ferries for the >Kingtiger<. Thus, when the Soviets approached, the division had to blow up all the tanks in order not to let them fall into the hands of the enemy. What the 2nd Byelorussian Front had not succeeded in doing, mishaps of own services succeeded. By January 20, 1945, the 1st Belorussian Front had not only achieved a complete breakthrough, but had also reached the German border at top speed in the midst of retreating Wehrmacht and ß troops. It has never been known who made the fatal mistake of opening a wide lane for the enemy in the Zwollen fortress. This case is reminiscent of events in Normandy in the summer of 1944. In the end, the Germans at Baranow and Palawy had lost 20 percent of all the >Kingtiger< ever put into service. The more than 100 >VI B< heavy tanks lost there, as the example of Panzer heavy division 507 shows, could have brought the Soviet major offensive from the bridgeheads into the greatest trouble without treachery and sabotage. Falsified strength reports and whitewash: Was

systematic manipulation behind many false situation assessments? Even on the Vistula in 1945, Hitler had firmly assumed completely false German troop strengths. In the last years of the war, many visitors to the situation conferences at the Führer's headquarters who came from outside noticed that there were many flags attached to colorful situation maps of troop units that no longer existed or had been virtually destroyed. Hitler and his high command had worked with phantom divisions in their planning and orders. Was this not clearly the visible consequences of self-deception or illusion, or was it simply >not-wanting-to-be-true"? In fact, these were the consequences of systematic misreporting and deception.¹⁻³ Particularly on the Eastern Front, where most casualties occurred and the vast majority of the Wehrmacht operated, the German leadership increasingly assumed false inventory figures from 1943 onward. This is reminiscent of similar events in the fall of 1941 from the final phase of >Unternehmen Barbarossa. There are hard facts about this: On the basis of unbelievable >miscalculations of its own troop strength" the General Staff of the Army calculated already at the end of August 1943 the irretrievable losses of the Army on the Eastern Front at 710000 to 810000 men, although they amounted to 1.24 million men. This difference would have been enough to replace twice the 6th Army destroyed in Stalingrad (about 175000 men of German personnel). But it gets worse: by the end of 1944, the total losses of the German Army were close to 3.1 million men, whereas the General Staff and the Wehrmacht Leadership Staff calculated losses of only 2.1 to 2.2 million soldiers. The result was that by the end of 1944 Hitler had to believe that he still had about 1 million more men than he actually had. This figure was the equivalent of over 90 divisions that existed only on paper. There were other tricks as well: brigade-sized artillery units were extrapolated as >artillery corps<, and groupings of one or two battalions of tanks and infantry were cheekily called >brigades<. All this meant that Hitler and Jodl often gave the front-line troops impossible, "fantastic"-seeming tasks. They had to fail just as much for >lack of mass* as the commanded holding of undermanned front sections. SS-Obersturmbannführer Otto Skorzeny himself witnessed such a scene during a visit to the Führer's headquarters in September 1944.¹ The subject was the situation in Hungary: "The officers of the General Staff had, as usual, prepared a map and marked the divisions available in the southeast. During the first two days of my stay I was able to observe Hitler at his >war game< and how he carefully considered all the information supplied to him. If it was a front section which did not concern some of the officers present, they retired to the anteroom and waited until they were called. Thus, on the first day, I involuntarily witnessed a conversation between two officers who wore the red stripes of the general officers on their pants. "You know<, said one, >that of the three divisions in the east of Hungary, two have only the strength of a battalion now, and if the 3rd wants to send two battalions to the front, it will have to make an effort. This cannot go well! . The other one said: >This won't work out well either, and we can't help it!

< But it seems that Hitler got a tip here after all [from Skorzeny?], and when on the third day he asked precise and unpleasant questions about these three phantom divisions, he realized that he had been deceived. >So that means<, he cried, "that the orders I gave the day before yesterday were based on the existence of these divisions. And now I hear that these divisions no longer exist at all! At the front they must think that my orders are completely crazy. Why is there such a lie here, gentlemen? Why? I want to be told the truth! The lives of brave soldiers are at stake! <" By chance, it was sometimes possible to stop in time such orders based on false assessments of the situation. We owe another example to the highly decorated "Panzerknacken Hans-Ulrich Rudel. It was about the "Operation Viper<. Thus, the Stuka pilot reported that during a visit in the summer of 1944, Göring "informed him of great news": "In their front section, we have prepared a large counteroffensive, which will be supported by 300 tanks. In the lead, the 14th Division will attack with 60 tanks." Colonel Rudel, however, had spoken to the general of the 14th Division the day before. The latter had reported to him that he did not have a single

tank left capable of fighting. When Goering heard this, he did not believe it and telephoned the front. He learned that what Rudel said was true and that instead of the 300 tanks that had been scheduled, at best only 40 could be used. Even "Operation Viper" could still be canceled in time. All this led to the fact that again and again ordered attack or defense operations of the Wehrmacht failed and the German leadership could not explain the causes. This often resulted in severe reproaches against the local commanders, up to and including their dismissal, which was seen as a great injustice by the officers concerned, but also by the fighting troops.¹ Richard Schulze-Kossens, personal adjutant to Adolf Hitler at the time, wrote to Henry Picker on this subject in 1976: "Perhaps it should also have been pointed out to what extent treason was practiced and how much the work of the resistance movement led to casualties on the most diverse fronts. Reference could also have been made to the often erroneous assessments of the situation that were presented to Hitler and on which he based his decisions."² As the first officer of the Waffen-SS, Schulze-Kossens had constant access to all military situation meetings from October 1942. Hitler made it his duty to always tell the truth in situation reports - especially in crisis situations. Only if he was informed accurately at all times could he take remedial action in risky situations. Just when the major catastrophes of June 1944 in East and West completely ruined the German strategic situation, Reich Minister Dr. Goebbels complained about the unfair handling of the truth at the high command: "In the OKW there are unrestrained overoptimists, not to say illusionists. . . Any unpleasant news from the front is doused with a sauce of whitewash, so that it is only possible for the critical mind to penetrate to the core of the actual situation."³ With the exception of the incidents described by Rudel and Skorzeny, it is not known whether the German High Command ever realized the systematic nature of these false reports. Interestingly, even in the memoirs of those who regularly took an active part in the situation conferences at the Führer's headquarters, such as General Guderian, there is no indication of this. B) Who was complicit in the loss of the old German provinces of East Prussia and Pomerania? The "Betrayal of Lötzen". Was East Prussia to be given up prematurely to the Soviets? When the major Russian attack began in East Prussia on January 13, 1945, the Soviets encountered an elaborate defense system, some of which dated back to installations built before and during World War I by Germans and their tsarist opponents. The Germans had learned the exact date of the attack through defections and cleared the advance front line in time for the Soviets' artillery barrage. The Soviets were held off for several days, and the German counterattacks brought the Russians to the brink of defeat several times. It turned out that large parts of the Soviet infantry, which was filled up with former prisoners of war, convicts and supply and stage troops combed out from other units, lacked operational will. Especially the Panzer Corps "Großdeutschland" proved its worth in stopping the Red Army. Nevertheless, after several days of fighting, the Russians had finally succeeded in making a first breakthrough through the German lines. This had led to disagreements between "Heeresgruppe Mitte" and the Army High Command. Hitler had authorized going back only as far as the lakes position around the strong fortress of Lötzen. For this purpose he had promised as reinforcements a panzer division from Courland and 20 infantry battalions. All that was lacking was only the time for these reinforcements to arrive - and the supplies. The 3rd Panzer Army had to face the Russian attack in January with just three days' worth of fuel and ammunition. During that month, countless German vehicles were lost for lack of gasoline without enemy action. When the ragtag "East Prussian Army" later had to retreat to the Samland, its officers were outraged to discover that the forests of the Samland housed huge underground depots, full of gasoline, ammunition, and supplies. Everything that had been missing during the decisive January defensive battles now had to be blown up, burned, or, as in the case of the fuel, pumped out into the sand. The "Heeresgruppe Mitte" had held the front along the eastern border of East Prussia and the Vistula Valley since the end of 1944. It was under the command of Colonel General Georg-Hans Reinhardt. The "Heeresgruppe Mitte" was subordinated to two armies,

the 4th Army under General Friedrich Hossbach and the 2nd Army under General Walter Weiss. To this day it is unclear to what extent Colonel General Reinhardt was involved in the "July 20 Conspiracy". What is proven is that the leading conspirator, General Olbricht, had made "every effort" to win Reinhardt over.¹ The German High Command had intended the fortress of Lötzen to be the cornerstone of the defense of East Prussia. It stood on the site of an old fortification dating back to 1846. From the point of view of defense strategy, it was intended to exploit the natural terrain features of the Great Masurian Lakes and effectively block Russian armies advancing into East Prussia. Already at the outbreak of the First World War, Fort Lötzen played an important role in the mobilization of the German imperial forces in Masuria. Only about 4000 soldiers under the command of Colonel Busse successfully defended the fortress against a direct Russian attack at that time.^{2,3} At the beginning of the large-scale Russian attack in 1945 everything was different. Already on January 24, 1945, the Russians had opened up against Lötzen and achieved a deep penetration up to 4 km eastward by the inner wing of the "Hannibal Group" (Police Group) and the 367th Infantry Division. Now the hour of the Lötzen fortress would have struck. In principle, a relatively small force would have been able to hold the fortress for a considerable time even in 1945. However, the garrison troops had already withdrawn from the fortress, leaving behind only a few rearguards, who fought fiercely for several hours before succumbing to the Red Army. News of the loss of Lötzen without much of a fight arrived as a severe blow to the German High Command in Berlin. General Guderian was deeply shocked and Hitler furious – this especially because he had ordered that the fortress of Lötzen separating the two Masurian Lakes be held until he personally authorized a withdrawal. When Hitler received word of the surrender of Lötzen, it illuminated in a flash the situation that had hitherto been reported to him in veiled form. He had assumed until then, as had Guderian, that Lötzen was still "the best-armed and best-manned fortress" in Germany. To General Jodl, Hitler compared the "betrayal of Lötzen" with the "fall of Avranches" in August 1944, which, triggered by misconduct on the part of Field Marshal von Kluge, had heralded the loss of all France. Hitler demanded explanations, but instead he received another alarming communique: the pressure on Königsberg was so great that the 4th Army would give up all of East Prussia east of the Alle River. There followed a long telephone conversation between General Reinhardt and Hitler, during which Reinhardt repeatedly tried to convince Hitler of the necessity of such a withdrawal. The Führer, however,

was not prepared to make a decision and instead promised Reinhardt that he would call him back at about 5 p.m. with a decision. When the timeline had passed without a call having come, General Reinhardt signaled to the Army High Command at about 7 p.m. that, without having received any orders, he would now withdraw his forces to the Haidenberg–Friedland line along the Alle River, as he had previously announced. Two hours later the teletype rattled off, and Reinhardt learned that he and his chief of staff, Heidkämper, had been dismissed. Hitler had been deceived, realizing far too late that a game was afoot at > Army Group Center< of which he had known nothing. The abandonment of Lötzen and General Reinhardt's evacuation maneuver had ruined everything. Instead of reinforcing the overall front to hold East Prussia as long as they could, Generals Reinhardt and Hossbach, without informing the High Command, had ordered a breakout to the west. The fact that not only Königsberg and the Samland, but the entire province had to be abandoned for this was accepted. The deliberations about the premature evacuation of East Prussia were kept strictly secret from the outside. General Reinhardt, however, wanted to inform the OB of the 4.

Army, General Hossbach, in time. Since this could not be done by telephone because of the >danger of eavesdropping< (!), Reinhardt tried to get to Hossbach at Lötzen. However, this failed due to road congestion and new snowfalls. On January 24, 1945, a meeting between the commanders-in-chief of the Army Group and the 4th Army did take place. Allegedly, the generals agreed in principle. Hitler was

not to learn of their true intentions prematurely, nor was Gauleiter Koch, the Reich Defense Commissioner of East Prussia. The problem was, however, that they had to cooperate to some extent with Koch, since otherwise the population would have been left defenseless at the mercy of the Red Army during the planned rapid evacuation of East Prussia. October 1944 had already shown under which command disregard of all norms of international law the Soviet soldiers had behaved in the conquered villages and when rolling over treks. In fact, the reality looked much worse than the GoEBBELS propaganda had ever proclaimed. It is quite clear that if Reinhardt and Hossbach had succeeded in their lightning withdrawal from East Prussia, most of the civilian population would have been left behind, at the mercy of the conquerors. Nevertheless, through word of mouth, some inhabitants of East Prussia learned of the intentions of "Heeresgruppe Mitte* to evacuate East Prussia prematurely. Many, however, perhaps most, believed the official assurances and wanted to wait for the official evacuation order. To initiate Reinhardt's planned evacuation of East Prussia, the 4th Army was to counterattack in the direction of Marienburg/Marienwerder. The Army High Command was cautiously informed of the planned action on the evening of January 23, 1945, without reporting that its own forces were insufficient both to break through to the west and to hold Königsberg and the Samland. The decision of "Heeresgruppe Mitte* to attack to the west was accompanied by "strange chaos*. The commanding officers could not learn much about the situation, including what to do with their units. Obviously, there were conspicuous differences of opinion about this among the corps, the army and the newly formed "Army Group Vistula*. The "alleged stupidity* with which the Army Group proceeded was demonstrated by the example of Panzer Abteilung FKL 302. This remote-control special division had already been fighting successfully in East Prussia since the fall of 1944 with remote-controlled BIV-type cargo carriers guided by assault guns. By higher order (!) the entire stock of 65 Borgward BIV cargo carriers had to be blown up at the end of January 1945. A valuable weapon for the defense against Soviet attacks was given out of hand.¹ Also the Panzerkorps >Großdeutschland< complained before its sudden withdrawal to the Vistula front about misappropriated uses of its units by the "Heeresgruppe Mitte<. The counterattack of "Heeresgruppe Mitte< to the west initially encountered surprised Soviet opponents and met with great success. Soviet reserves, however, then made the German advance a slow slog through until January 29, 1945. Now the time had come to throw the second squadron of "Heeresgruppe Mitte< into battle. The exhausted men of the 1st Squadron were already 10 km from Elbing by that time. But the divisions of the 2nd Squadron were no longer there. The Army Group had >accidentally< diverted the ready units elsewhere; there were no other reserves left. The attack to the west thus came to a halt. The first victorious German troops had to retreat. The refugees, who had left much too late, were now caught between the fighting troops, at the mercy of the Soviets. After General Reinhardt was deposed, the planned operation had then taken place on General Hossbach's initiative. Hossbach, too, hoped that by the time it became clear to Hitler what was happening, it would be too late to insist on continuing to defend Königsberg and East Prussia. Guderian and Hitler had been following the reports on the progress of the counterattack closely, but at Hitler's soap with growing suspicion. It was at this point that the decisive intervention of Gauleiter Koch occurred. As the situation around Königsberg worsened, he went to a prepared bunker near Neutief on the Vistula Spit. From there he sent a message to Hitler: "The 4th Army is fleeing toward Reich territory. It is trying with great energy to escape to the west. I continue to defend East Prussia only with the Volkssturm!" The existence of this telegram has been bitterly denied in recent times. The telegram itself has not yet surfaced, and Koch in later years denied having sent it. Whatever the truth behind it, the news of developments in East Prussia caused Hitler's distrust of Hossbach to boil over. Hitler exploded, "Hossbach is in cahoots with the Russians!" The Prussian general was finally deposed on January 30, 1945. Hossbach flew back to Berlin to report to the OKH. From there he went to

Göttingen, where he was treated in a hospital for an >Ohrleid<. Repeatedly, local party officials (!) then tried to arrest him there with the accusation that he had ordered the unauthorized escape from East Prussia. Hossbach, however, successfully evaded arrest by drawing his pistol and threatening to shoot the officials. Hossbach, who had already broken with Hitler since 1938 on the occasion of the "Fritsch Crisis", later had to serve at the "Nuremberg Trials" as the alleged author of a protocol from 1937 forged by the Allies. General Friedrich Wilhelm Müller, a solid officer with a long record of personal bravery, was appointed as Hossbach's successor. General Müller was ordered to continue the attack that had begun to the west, but to hold East Prussia anyway. The German attack formations, however, had now reached the end of their strength. The tragedy for East Prussia was that a second attack squadron was no longer available, which would have made a breakthrough to the west possible. "Heeresgruppe Mitte" was renamed "Heeresgruppe Nord" on January 26, 1945, under the command of General Lothar Rendulic. Rendulic had orders to hold Königsberg as long as possible at any cost. Hitler shared the fear that the city was to serve as the seat of a possible counter-government dependent on the Soviets. In fact, there are indications that the Russian-controlled >National Committee of Free Germany* and the "League of German Officers" had planned such a "Königsberg solution". However, nothing came of it. The fortress of Königsberg held against the Red Army until April 12, 1945. About 42 000 Germans (soldiers and civilians) lost their lives during the siege, the Russian victims are estimated at 60000. A "counter-government" could thus no longer be established in Königsberg – no matter what the plans of the Russians might have been in this respect. Perhaps the behavior of General Reinhardt to give up the whole province of East Prussia prematurely in January 1945 becomes more explainable. The biography of the leading resistance general, Friedrich Olbricht, indicates, as already mentioned, that "Olbricht made every effort to win over such commanders-in-chief as General Reinhardt and General Heinrici (Oder Front 1945) to the circle of conspirators." Nothing was ever known about the results of his efforts. That Colonel General Reinhardt was disappointed and frustrated should be understandable: In July 1941, treacherously acting gentlemen at the High Command of the Wehrmacht had forbidden him the possible capture of Leningrad. Since he must have remained unaware of the background and the people involved in these unbelievable events, he probably seemed a suitable target for the conspirators. The last remnants of the German "East Prussian Army" surrendered to the Soviets only on May 8, 1945, on the Heia peninsula. Their fanatical resistance had bled Rokossowski's 2nd White Russian Front dry. The strength of an average Russian rifle division on the East Prussian front fell to 3600 men. In the period between January and April 1945, the Red Army forfeited 584778 men, 3525 tanks, and 1450 aircraft just to capture this one German province. In comparison, the Wehrmacht in 1944 had lost 700000 men in the first five months of "Operation Barbarossa" on the entire Eastern Front from Finland to the Black Sea. The incredibly valiant German defense of East and West Prussia, despite "errors in leadership" and artificial shortages of supplies, not only enabled a large portion of the civilian population to escape across the sea, but also helped shape the future of Europe, according to modern American authors.¹⁶ The "failed propaganda channel" or: Was the "Wilhelm

Gustloff" lured into a trap? One and a half million civilians and about 500,000 mostly wounded soldiers were enabled by the German navy to escape from the vengeful Red Army in the last months of the war, starting in January 1945. General Admiral Oskar Kummetz performed almost superhuman feats considering the circumstances.¹³ Against this background, disasters also occurred that stand out in the history of shipping to this day. In the greatest of these tragedies, betrayal probably also played a role that has been denied to this day. On January 30, 1945, the Soviet submarine >S-13< sank the "Wilhelm Gustloff", manned by some 8800 civilians and 1500 mostly wounded servicemen and naval auxiliaries, by three torpedo hits. In the pre-war period, the 25480 GRT "Wilhelm Gustloff" was the flagship of the welfare organization "Kraft durch Freude" (KdF). In 1939–45, after an interim hospital

career, she was used as a residential ship for the second submarine training division (2nd ULD) stationed at Gotenhafen-Oxhöft. When the 2nd ULD was to be moved west due to the planned evacuation of the Heia base, the "Wilhelm Gustloff" was also among the transport ships. Originally, mainly members of the U-Boot Lehrdivision were to be brought to the west, in addition there were people determined by the NSDAP, who were to receive special passes from the district leadership. Finally, far beyond that, many thousands of refugees, mainly women and children, were taken off the ship. Now the door was opened to the drama. For the security of the escorts to the west, in the port of Heia, the 9th Security Division of the Kriegsmarine was responsible. On January 29, 1945, the 9th Sicherungs-Division noticed that the "Wilhelm Gustloff" was gathering steam and making preparations to sail.

Korvettenkapitän Leonhardt of the 9th U-Boot-Division desperately tried to prevent the departure of the "Wilhelm Gustloff", as he was not yet able to provide sufficient escort. Only a day or two later, he could have provided safe escort vehicles. But the commander of the 2nd ULD did not accept this any more than he accepted Leonhardt's forceful report on the enemy situation in the eastern North Sea. A strange haste to depart became more and more apparent. Captain Leonhardt, through his Pillau-based 9th Sicherungs Division chief, Frigate Captain von Blanc, now tried to prevent the premature departure of the steamer carrying thousands of people without experienced escort. Leonhardt said to von Blanc:

"But they will sail, Captain. They want to run a few torpedo fishing boats along as symbolic protection. How am I supposed to stop that?" Von Blanc, after a moment's consideration, told him that he would immediately report the situation to the "Admiral Eastern Baltic" and also notify the naval warfare headquarters in Berlin. But before any decision from "above" arrived, the "Wilhelm Gustloff" threw off the lines in Gotenhafen. Grand Admiral Karl Dönitz, the former Commander-in-Chief of the Kriegsmarine, commented in the post-war period that the 2nd ULD could operate independently in the Baltic Sea, but the moment it moved westward, this transport, like any other, fell clearly under the responsibility of the 9th Security Division. In this respect, the "Wilhelm Gustloff" should not have sailed at all. In the meantime, on January 25, 1945, the evacuation of the 1st Submarine Training Division from Pillau was successfully completed. Without any enemy interference the ships "Robert Ley", "Pretoria", "Ubenau" and "Duala", secured by ships of the 9th Security Division, had reached their port of destination. Once again, fate gave the "Wilhelm Gustloff" a chance when the fully loaded "KdF" ship anchored again to wait for the ship "Hansa". However, Korvettenkapitän Zahn, leader of the submarine training, gave telephone instructions to march immediately westward alone only with the torpedo boat "Löwe". Of course, the planned solo voyage of the ship was not without controversy on the command bridge of the "Wilhelm Gustloff". Captains Petersen and Zahn as well as the driving captains Weller and Köhler, their navigation officer Vollrath and Korvettenkapitän Zahn (Kriegsmarine) had different opinions. Simultaneously with the departure of the "Wilhelm Gustloff", the Soviet submarine "S-13" under Captain Mari- nesko had reached the height of Heia on January 30, 1945. Marinesko decided to let the "S- 13" surface and wait for his prey. At about 6 p.m., a radio mate suddenly appeared on the bridge of the "Wilhelm Gustloff" with a radio message. "That too ... !" he commented on the paper as he skimmed the text: "A minesweeper consisting of several vehicles is heading straight for us in open formation at twelve nautical miles speed!" Captain Petersen noted that this meant danger of collision and ordered position lights to be set until the formation had passed. Now the full position lights were set, the green on port, the red on starboard. The consequences were to be fatal. For years the view was spread that it had taken longer for the minesweeper to appear. When, at 7:26 p.m., the order transmitter then reported: "Post stern - the last sweeping boat is passing the stern!", Captain Petersen ordered the position lights to be extinguished at 7:30 p.m.. In fact, according to later research by Heinz Schön, it is proven that nobody ever sighted this allegedly "oncoming minesweeper", neither on the bridge of the "Wilhelm Gustloff" nor on the accompanying torpedo boat "Löwe". It

seems that in reality this unit did not exist at all. After the announced minesweeper had not appeared, Captain Petersen had the telltale position lights extinguished again at about 7:30 p.m.. However, this had been sufficient that on the lookout of the Soviet submarine >S-13< the lights of the "Wilhelm Gustloff< were sighted by the officer on watch of the surfaced moving boat. At about 8:30 p.m., the sailor on watch, Alfred Wiegand, on the >Gustloff< saw a strange "blinker" at some distance, which he thought was the periscope of a submarine. When he immediately reported his observation to the command bridge of the "Gustloff*", he received the answer: "No danger, German submarine!" From 8 p.m. onward, the >Gustloff< could receive only garbled radio transmissions, as radio communications had apparently somehow been interrupted. This was also a doom for the >Gustloff<, because shortly after 8 p.m. the shore radio station Gotenhafen-Oxhöft sent a radio message with a U-boat warning message for the sailing area of the >Gustloff<. At that time, the large passenger ship had already run to her doom. Captain A. J. Marinesko saw his victim approaching with burning position lights for quite a while, and about 9:15 p.m. >S-13< was right in attack position. Then a Russian torpedo triple fan ran toward the "Wilhelm Gustloff<. Muffled explosions rumbled through the sea. Now there was another "Erroneous Tower. Badly hit, the "Wilhelm Gustloff* sent out an SOS. But this happened on a wave that could not be heard by the vehicles of the 9th Security Division. Thus, the boats that were most likely to help did not learn of the disaster for a long time. Considering all the strange facts, the question arises whether the "Wilhelm Gustloff< was not lured into a trap. Was the former flagship of Nazi propaganda to be sunk as a symbol of the imminent downfall of the Third Reich on the anniversary of the NSDAP's seizure of power? Other motives were a possible interruption of the German evacuation efforts across the Baltic Sea, which were just getting underway. Was a misjudgement of the danger to blame for the premature departure of the >Wilhelm Gustloff* without escort, or was the Soviet submarine >S-13< deliberately waiting for the former parade steamer of the KdF? Who sent the fateful radio message to the >Wilhelm Gustloff*, was it received on the >Wilhelm Gustloff* at all or was it "fabricated" there? It has not yet been possible to find an official source for the mysterious radio message, whose existence has been unanimously confirmed by surviving officers on the >Gustloff<. Was this all part of a perfidious intelligence enterprise with the assistance of German helpers on the 2nd ULD or the radio crew of the >Gustloff<? 9343 victims of the disaster, among them certainly more than 5000 children, paid the ultimate price. If it was about a propaganda effect, the "Unternehmen Gustloff< was a total failure for its originators, because the German Wehrmacht report, press and radio kept silent about the sinking of the "Wilhelm Gustloff<. What became known were only rumors from Baltic ports where recovered victims of the disaster were brought ashore. The Western Allies, however, knew (suspiciously?) well. Their air-dropped propaganda sheet "Nachrichten für die Truppe" devoted the first page to the sinking of the "Wilhelm Gustloff<. But even the Allies were silent about the extremely high number of casualties. For many years after the end of the war, no one learned the outcome of the "Gustloff< disaster. Were they afraid of thousands of Germans as innocent victims? Even the traitors of the ship remained in the dark. There was no heroic deed to celebrate here. Completely unexpected? The >East Pomerania Operation< and its dire consequences When the Red Army had advanced to the Oder River in late January 1945, the German leadership faced a crucial question: would Stalin's army cross the Oder directly and march on Berlin, or first eliminate the flank threat in Rear Pomerania and Silesia with Bohemia and Moravia to the south? At first, General Zhukov planned to take Berlin by March 1, 1945, at the latest, but was called off by Stalin. On February 4, 1945, the Russian High Command decided to move first against Pomerania. This plan later went down in Soviet war history as the "East Pomerania Operation*. This operation was intended to eliminate the German flank

threat. The new targets were called Rear Pomerania, West Prussia and Gdansk. The backbone of the Russian attack was to be the 19th Army, freshly moved from Finland. In fact, as early as January 1945, there were warnings from the German 20th Mountain Army deployed in Norway, which had noted the detachment of Soviet 19th Army units from the Far North. The fresh 19th Army was to decisively reinforce the Russian troops in Pomerania, exhausted from fighting the Wehrmacht. For example, the 88th Heavy Guard Tank Regiment had only two IS-2 tanks left in February 1945. However, the main blow was to be delivered by the 1st and 2nd Guards Tank Armies. The relative lull in fighting for several weeks worried "Army Group Vistula*", so that in the February days of 1945 it tried to find out the enemy's intentions with its own reconnaissance resources.¹ Even before that, fairly accurate results were available from German day and night air reconnaissance, which had detected signs that forces were being brought in for an attack on Pomerania. The Luftwaffe had used Do-217 and FW-189 night reconnaissance aircraft to detect at least 8,000 vehicles in time to reach the 2nd Army front in Pomerania. Also, binocular reconnaissance by courageous outposts of the position force made out strong Soviet transport movements, clear signs of attack preparations. But, although strong Soviet scouts were reported as early as the night of February 22, 1945, as preliminary reconnaissance for an attack, >Heeresgruppe Weichsel* did not react because it considered only the Oder Front to be at risk. Gehlen claimed in the postwar period that "during the Eastern campaign it was rarely possible to detect the displacement of Russian rifle units from the air." This is exactly what the few night reconnaissance aircraft of Luftflotte 6 managed to do in Pomerania in February 1945. Nevertheless, the weekly "Luftlage Ost" of Abteilung >Fremde Heere Ost< of February 23, 1945, announced that there were no concrete indications of the Soviet advance. Already one day later the Russians arrived. On February 20, 1945, a German agent had also detected a Russian emphasis to push northwest toward the Pomeranian coast. The agent also reported the exact Soviet section of the attack. Despite all these reports, the German General Staff continued to hold the mistaken view in late February 1945 that the Red Army would advance directly to Berlin. General Gehlen, chief of the division "Fremde Heere Ost<, stated responsibly that the >Westoperation< would experience a resumption via the line Görlitz-Schwedt, the timing of which, however, was "still open". Officially, "Fremde Heere Ost< recognized neither the attack of the 1st, nor that of the 2nd Russian Front, nor the shift of the 19th Army into the attack area. We will come back to the method of "withholding* material by "Foreign Armies East<. "Officially* the 19th Army was so stated by Gehlen only one day after the beginning of the large-scale attack in Eastern Pomerania, the army had hitherto been "held in reserve in the depths in front of the Finnish front." Instead, the "Army Group Vistula* sent telexes to the subordinate three armies with the remark that the Soviet deployment for the continuation of the operation across the Oder - target area Berlin had been completed and that an attack had now to be expected there. This was again like in White Russia in 1944 or before Baranov in January 1945. However, only two days before the start of the Soviet "Pomerania Operation* "on behalf of the Führer", Chief of General Staff Guderian sent in a flash telex at 10:25 p.m. to the "Army Group Vistula* the warning of the danger of a Soviet attack:

"There is a great danger that Adversary with partial forces eastward of the Oder will carry out an advance to the Baltic Sea, thus splitting Army Group Vistula and breaking the Baltic links of Danzig/Gotenhafen and Stettin." It is not officially known what prompted Hitler to issue this warning about Guderian. It can be assumed that Luftwaffe reconnaissance results and agent reports of an impending attack on the Pomeranian Front came to him through other channels. Hitler's warning was worthless, however, since nevertheless no reinforcement of German troops in the endangered area took place. The possible movement of panzer divisions (such as the 4th and 7th Pz Div.) to the later breakthrough point, which had been precisely identified by reconnaissance, was omitted, just as all reserves were thrown to the Oder River, where the Russians did not strike until mid-April. Thus, the

major Russian attack on February 24, 1945, came as a "complete surprise* for the German high command. Using massive artillery with an artillery density of about 150 tubes – not counting >Stalin organs< – per kilometer of front, the Soviets attacked with massive air and battlefield support at the weakest point of the Pomeranian Front, the seam between the 3rd Panzer Army and the 2nd Army. The deeply echeloned 19th Army, after 40 minutes of artillery and Stalin's organ support, faced the positions of the 32nd Infantry Division, badly battered by the previous fighting, over a width of only a few kilometers. Despite massive inferiority, the 32nd Infantry Division was able to prevent a Russian breakthrough on February 24, 1945, but was forced to move northward a day later. The Soviets had advanced only a few hundred meters per day so far. The Russian attack gained ground only after the 1st and 2nd Guards tank armies had broken loose in Pomerania, which the Germans had suspected were still in the Oder Front area near Küstrin on the move against Berlin. The Russian tank surge then forced the breakthrough, and in a single day the Russians now advanced 40 km. The elimination of the flank threat from the Pomeranian and West Prussian areas by the Russian army could no longer be stopped. However, the complete rolling up of the German front on the coast dragged on until April 1945 because of the stubborn resistance of the Wehrmacht. The success of the Russian >Ostpommern-Operation< had severe consequences for the Germans. The situation on the Eastern Front, which had been stable since early February 1945, deteriorated dramatically after the success of the >Eastern Pomerania Operation<. Although Hitler had indeed recognized the chronological order and the connection between "Ostpommern-Operation and "Berliner Operation<, his generals did not follow him. Goebbels wrote indignantly in his diary: "The Führer sees the right thing, he also communicates it to his staff, but they draw no conclusions from it. But what good are insights if they are not translated into reality. The insights are then usually overlaid by the wisdom of the experts and cannot have any effect." Goebbels then pointed Hitler to the minutes of the situation discussion of the Pomerania case: "From these minutes it can be seen how right the Fuehrer was. But it is shocking to realize that the military advisers of the Fuehrer not only do not understand him, but systematically contradict his clear and categorical orders. How can I still have confidence in such military advisers! Here, in my opinion, lies the root of our failures." In response to Goebbels' letter, Hitler is then said to have given him detailed explanations of how such a development could have come together in the first place. He added that it had been just as in the case of Moscow or Stalingrad. He had seen the right thing, but his military staff had let him down. On March 7, Gehlen had to present to Guderian how it could have happened that >Fremde Heere Ost< had failed to recognize the attack of both the 1st and 2nd Belorussian Fronts, although there were clear indications of it. As a personnel consequence for his misjudgments in the Soviet >East Pomerania operation<, General Gehlen was dismissed a few weeks later, on 9 April 1945. Even before that, the Führer had ordered that the Abteilung "Fremde Heere Ost< be reduced to a minimum. Gehlen was lucky that nothing worse happened to him. However, Gehlen undermined even this order by dividing his division, which had survived all the persecutions of July 20 unscathed, into two halves. The general was now able to take care of the relocation of his photocopied documents to the Alps undisturbed in order to prepare his post-war plans. The rest of the files were burned beforehand.

C) Controversial: Was Stalin's triumphant march to Berlin unstoppable? German Air Superiority in 1945 and the Cancelled Major Attack >Bodenplatte Ost< A fact widely unknown today is that in February 1945, for the first time since the days of the fateful Battle of Kursk, there was again German air superiority on the Eastern Front. Even as the major Russian winter offensive was imminent in January 1945, Luftwaffe leadership had ordered Schlachtgeschwader 4 and Jagdgeschwader 6 to move from the west to the threatened eastern front. As the breakthrough through the German front became apparent, the Luftwaffe High Command, full of haste, also threw Fighter Squadrons 1, 3, 4, 11, 77, 300, and 301 to the endangered eastern front. These were joined by Battle Squadrons 1, 2, 3, and 77. All air fuel reserves were now reserved for the battle in the east.¹ After the collapse of the German defenses in the area of >Heeresgruppe Mitte< and >Heeresgruppe Weichseh, it seemed that the way to Berlin was indeed open to the Russians. Barely two weeks after the outbreak of their offensive, the Red Army had already been able to strike its first bridgeheads across the Oder River. General Zhukov reported to the Soviet High Command Stavka that no more substantial German troops would stand between him and the Reich capital, Berlin. But who was now coming was the German Luftwaffe! Their fighter and battle planes inflicted terrible losses on the Soviet armored columns that were rolling along the few solid roads in long lines, smashed horse-drawn supply columns, and hammered the trucks and marching detachments of the Red infantry with their machine guns. On January 28, 1945, German airmen alone reported destroying more than 800 Soviet vehicles as well as 40 tanks and 40 artillery pieces. A day earlier, the Luftwaffe had destroyed 300 vehicles, 8 tanks, and 20 artillery pieces from the air. Some Soviet heavy tank regiments consisted only of single tanks. The rest lay destroyed and burned out in the terrain between the Vistula and Oder rivers. The Soviet offensive was hit all the harder because the Soviets were now suffering a fate similar to that of the Germans in Operation Barbarossa< in the fall of 1941. For lack of suitable railroad lines (the German standard gauge first had to be nailed down to Russian broad gauge) and the onset of spring mud, the Red Army was left to rely on solid roads and highways: a magnet for German fliers. The Red Air Force, so numerically superior as late as January 1945, suffered from its flooded and sodden grassy fields in Poland, while the Germans could operate easily in the Reich from fixed airfields with concrete runways and excellent hangars. In fact, the Russians at that time lost more aircraft attempting takeoffs and landings on their sodden airfields than they did in action against the Germans. The consequences for the Soviets were drastic. By January 29, 1945, Soviet headquarters was already behind its own schedule. It ordered Generals Zhukov and Konyev to nevertheless take Berlin by February 15 or 16, 1945, in a joint operation. To no avail. German air strikes continued mercilessly, endangering even the Soviet bridgeheads across the Oder that were just being built. In the first three days of February 1945, the Luftwaffe managed to destroy another 2000 vehicles and 51 Soviet tanks from the air. "You cannot imagine the tremendous losses we are inflicting on the Russians by our air attacks," wrote one German pilot in a letter home. This was no

exaggeration. The Luftwaffe, which had thrown all its available reserves to the eastern front, especially to the area of >Heeresgruppe Mitte<, actually succeeded in establishing air superiority in the east before the end of February 1945. Thus, air observation of the Red Army's First White Russian Front recorded 13950 Luftwaffe overflights in the first ten days of February compared to only 624 sorties by the 16th Russian Air Army. The Soviet difficulties were further increased by repeated Luftwaffe attacks on their own airfields, which resulted in the deaths of many well-known Soviet fighter pilots. However, German pilots also suffered heavy losses from flak. At the same time, the Luftwaffe had worse things in the pipeline to stabilize its own air superiority. It was clear that the Red Air Force would try everything to bring its numerical superiority back into play soon. German Luftflotte 6, in conjunction with the 1st Fighter Division, therefore planned a large-scale annihilation attack on the remaining Red Army airfields. Also called >Bodenplatte >Ost<, this large-scale operation, similar to its counterpart "Bodenplatte*" of 1 January 1945 on the Western Front, was intended to paralyze the Soviet air armies on their softened-up airfields before they could be moved forward from them. For this attack, additional parts of SG-151 with 17 FW-190Fs and another 52 Ju-87Hs were made available by the General of the Battle Air Force. The main burden would have been borne by the normal fighter squadrons, similar to the earlier "Unternehmen Bodenplatte<" on January 1, 1945.^{1,2} For unknown reasons, this plan, which had been precisely prepared down to the last detail, was not put into action. All available documents are completely silent about the circumstances why >Bodenplatte Ost< was not allowed to be carried out. The Russian air forces could thus breathe a sigh of relief. Thus, in March 1945, the Russians succeeded in following up their air units with amazing speed. Like the Germans, they used captured German highways as runways. Often, just one day after the Germans had blown up and cleared one of the well-developed airfields in the Reich territory, it was already being used by Russian fighters. Immediately on the edge of the front, the Russians set up their radars, which detected German planes taking off, so that they now encountered Russian alert flotillas even as they flew over the front. Now it was the Russian air forces that took advantage of the concentration of the German air force on a few firmly established airfields and attacked them by day and night. Above all, an increasingly drastic shortage of fuel on the German side meant that the number of possible operational flights had to be restricted more and more. German air superiority was lost again. This is where "Bodenplatte Ost< could have provided the necessary breathing space. Its predecessor in the West had already resulted in the largest Western Allied aircraft loss of all time, despite high casualty figures, primarily due to its own previously uninformed flak. The result was a paralysis of tactical Allied air forces in Europe for ten days. Not affected, however, were the long-range bombers and fighters based in England. They could continue to attack German targets. On the eastern front, the situation was different. The main force of Soviet aircraft consisted of tactical fighters, strike fighters, and bombers. They would all have been exposed to German attack close to the front, as in June 1941. In fact, what history books now consider a "mop-up operation," the conquest of Germany in 1945, was by no means a clear, predictable endgame. The severity of the fighting was such that even U.S. President Roosevelt was reluctant to commit himself in early 1945 as to whether the war would end that year. The consequences of a big lie: Was a letter from Stalin to Eisenhower, overheard by German intelligence, responsible for the Russian victory on the Oder? On April 20, 1945, after four days, the Soviets succeeded in breaking through against the last contingent of the German army on the Oder. In one of the most bitter battles of World War II, half of all Soviet tanks had already been destroyed by the end of the second day. Stalin had to threaten the death penalty for all Red Army soldiers who would not obey the advance order. This had not been the case since 1942. In the end, it was only a few armored divisions that Germany had lacked for a possible defensive victory on the Oder. Yet this armored reserve had originally existed. Hitler, however, had ordered the 10th SS Panzer Division on March 30, the >Führergrenadier Division" on April 2, and the 25th Panzer Division

on April 3 to withdraw to Field Marshal Schörner in the Reich Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia. The commander-in-chief of >Heeresgruppe Weichseh, General Heinrich, was not informed of this momentous order until a meeting in the Führerbunker in Berlin in early April. Hitler admitted to Heinrich that the transfer of these divisions away from >Heeresgruppe Weichseh also bothered him, but that the main Russian attack would not be against Heinrich's >Heeresgruppe Weichseh, but against Schörner with the aim of taking Prague: "Already two Russian tank armies are getting ready for an offensive action in Schörner's sectors." Heinrich then had no more armored reserves. Despite Hitler's promise that the three divisions withdrawn would be positioned so close as to be able to assist >Heeresgruppe Weichseh if necessary, the >Führergrenadierdivision< and the 25th Panzer Division were not even transferred to Schörner, but to >Heeresgruppe Süd<! The whole maneuver seemed to be based on misinformation that Stalin had sent to the Allied Supreme Commander in Europe, Dwight D. Eisenhower. In it, Stalin responded to Eisenhower's communique, which the U.S. general intended to synchronize the Allied advance through Germany. The U.S. general had sent a personal letter to Stalin on March 28. In it, he informed the Russian leader that he had no intention of advancing into Berlin but would march into southern Germany. Eisenhower further suggested that U.S. and Soviet forces liaise along the Erfurt-Leipzig-Dresden axis.¹ Stalin viewed Eisenhower's strategic goals as implausible. He could not imagine that the Western Allies would ignore Berlin. On the night of April 8, a group of Soviet agents who had been parachuted in near Templin had fallen into German hands. Under interrogation, they admitted that their mission was to find out what plans the Allies had for an attack against the Russians. If the Allies reached Berlin first, they had orders to go into hiding and continue working. These were concrete signs of the emerging conflicts between the (still) Allies. Stalin's reply on March 30, 1945, therefore trickily confirmed that the future Soviet offensive would begin in mid-May in the direction of Leipzig, as Eisenhower had suggested. Wrongly, he wrote to General Eisenhower that Berlin was of no concern to him at all. Considering the timing of the correspondence between Eisenhower and Stalin, Hitler's order to move the three panzer divisions to the south seems more than a coincidence. At the same time, this shows that the leadership of the Third Reich must still have had ways and means to intercept the lines of communication between the highest Allied authorities in the East and West. In this case, however, the potentially battle-deciding German advantage turned into a strategic disadvantage because the Allies did not tell each other the truth. Hitler thus ended up in the same position as Stalin before Kharkov in the spring of 1943, when he based his bad decision on intelligence sources that used to be reliable!

Only that Stalin could make up for his blunder – and Hitler could not! The German front on the Oder was indeed reinforced to the last moment with all the means the Third Reich still had at its disposal at that time, but except for an armored reserve. In case of a Russian breakthrough, therefore, the >Heeresgruppe Weichsel* had hardly any tanks left to launch a counterattack. Then, from April 12, it was clear that the Russians were about to attack on the Oder. This time the Germans knew exactly when the Russians would come. Hitler ordered General Busse on the night before April 16 to withdraw his 9th Army in the remaining hours of darkness to a new, secret second major battle line. A line that Busse's boss Heinrich had developed without much enthusiasm. Thus came what had to come. As early as April 17, 1945, while the Oder front was still stable, the Army Group had realized that a Soviet breakthrough was imminent in the Müncheberg area.¹ As the Russian breakthrough slowly became apparent, General Heinrich implored his exhausted troops in a radio message to hold out for two more days, then everything would be done. Under the bravest resistance, the Oder front did indeed hold out that long, but nothing happened! Neither did it come to a separate peace, nor did the miracle weapons of Hitler's >all-around defense< start. When now consequently the breakthrough of the Red Army could not be prevented any

more, it would have depended on the armored German reserve. At least the 18th SS Panzer Grenadier Division >Nordland< and the 25th SS Panzer Grenadier Division >Nederland< were to serve as replacements for the withdrawn armored reserve. However, both units had only brigade strength! The two Panzergrenadier divisions, however, had to march through heavily wooded terrain with only a few good roads. Their transfer was possible only at night because of Russian air superiority, often over traffic routes clogged by refugees. Thus, no division was able to reach the critical sector in time, much less launch a coordinated counterattack. Although the two units still inflicted heavy casualties among the Soviet tanks, the 18th Panzer Grenadier Division had to withdraw toward Berlin, while the >Nederland< Division was pushed into the 9th Army sector. There it perished in the cauldron of Halbe. In fact, the course of the Battle of the Oder in April 1945 was not a glorious one for the Red Army. It was quite different from the offensives in Belarus, Romania, or Poland in 1945. The four-day defensive battle had led the Red Army to such a loss of substance in personnel and materiel that Zhukov had to revise his precise >Operation Plan Berlirn. While Marshal Zhukov thus advanced only a few kilometers a day despite the absence of a German tank reserve on the Oder front, his rival Marshal Koniev was able to measure his progress against the German defenders simultaneously in double-digit kilometers. He, too, had conspicuous German >errors< to thank in part for this. The Background to the Soviet Breakthrough at Cottbus It was not the defensive battle on the Oder, but the Soviet breakthrough at Cottbus by April 21, 1945, that ultimately led to the collapse of the Eastern Front and the enclosure of Berlin. Here, too, "oddities* occurred.¹⁻³ The "Army Group Vistula* had succeeded at that time in holding up the Russian major attack across the Oder for days with the greatest losses for the Russians and leaving Zhukov dearly deprived for every additional kilometer. The decision was made by Marshal Koniev's attack southeast of Berlin across the Neisse River. On the very first day, Koniev's army group had been able to establish two bridgeheads on this side of the river – exactly where Hitler had foreseen the Russian center of gravity, albeit with a different direction of thrust. To repel the Soviet offensive, the Germans had established a position system consisting of three levels. It was not yet completed on April 16, 1945, when the major Russian attack began. Also, the majority of the 388 armored fighting vehicles, fighter tanks and assault guns still in existence at the beginning of April were still being repaired at that time. A coincidence? Nevertheless, Koniev's men also suffered horrendous losses before they managed to break through. In general, Soviet tank losses in 1945 were below new production for the first time since the disaster year of 1941. The average (official) monthly losses of 3186 were offset by 2462 new production. In the 1941 disaster, there were 819 new productions for every 3723 monthly losses.⁴ Koniev had not attacked south toward Dresden, but advanced northwest toward Berlin. If Koniev's attack could not be stopped, the defenses of the Eastern Front were decisively defeated. This left Hitler less time than he had anticipated. In Koniev's path lay three elite German divisions under the command of the 4th Panzer Army. They were to serve as a reserve force in the event of a Soviet attack between "Army Group Weichseh and "Army Group Mitte<. These were the 10th SS Panzer Division >Frundsberg<, the 21st Panzer Division, and the "Führerbegleitdivisiom. These elite divisions could have caused the greatest difficulties to Marshal Koniev. However, Koniev's forces managed to advance for almost three days without being opposed by the three German divisions. Only the foremost parts of the 10th SS Panzer Division >Frundsberg< happened to come into direct contact with Soviet tanks on April 19, 1945 after a night march. This unbelievable event is treated more than stepmotherly in modern military history or preferably concealed right away. The deployment of the three elite divisions was completely mishandled. Despite excellent tactical performance, they were deployed only one after the other piecemeal and also delayed against Koniev. The leaderless units were thus able to be bypassed by the Russians, encircled and pushed back to the forming cauldron near Sprem- berg. Marshal Koniev's breakthrough behind the lines of General Busse's "Army Group Vistula"

thus became a fact. The 9th German Army was trapped in the deadly Halbe Cauldron and the German defenses in front of Berlin collapsed. At the Fuehrer's headquarters, this misconduct, which had led to the demise of three outstanding German divisions, was regarded as treason.¹ Interestingly, on the basis of the available documents, it is still impossible to decide who was responsible for the utter failure. The terrain between the Oder and Neisse rivers and the Breslau-Berlin highway between Cottbus and Spremberg had to be a key route for the advance of Soviet forces on Berlin from the very beginning. Stockpiled and well-motivated German elite divisions lay in correct position in front of it – and were led into the trap. The relief of Berlin is no longer taking place: Phantasm or insubordination? Major General Dethleffsen was a senior general staff officer who was a frequent participant in the situation meetings in the Führer's bunker in the Reich Chancellery in Berlin in March/April 1945. Dethleffsen gave an important indication of how Hitler, at the end of the war, rated the importance of betrayal on the German side for the outcome of the conflict: "When I had to orient Httt.fr on the night of April 20–21 about the breakthrough of the Soviets near Cottbus, which led to the collapse of the Eastern Front and the enclosure of Berlin, I was alone with him – it was the only time. Hitler received the Job's message with composure; but he again found only one word as an explanation for the Soviet success: >treason<. The fact that no witness was present encouraged me to ask Hitler: >Mein Führer, you speak so much of betrayal of the military leadership and the troops. Do you think that there is really so much betrayal?*" Hitler looked at me with an almost pitying look, as if only a fool could ask such a stupid question, and said: >The whole failures in the East are only due to betrayal.* . . I had the impression that Hitler was speaking from the deepest conviction. "1'2 r The pincers of the Red Army were then closing mercilessly around Berlin. However, Hitler and Jodl had developed a final concept for this eventuality: Koniev's breakthrough had not been stopped, as mentioned earlier, but was able to spread largely undisturbed in the gap that had opened up between the 4th Panzer Army and the 9th Army. To close this deadly gap for Berlin, Hitler had ordered Schörner and Heinrici to attack. Field Marshal Schörner seized the opportunity to take the offensive against the long flank of the Russian-Polish army grouping, which was continuing to move westward, in order, as an order from Army Group Center put it, "to cut off the enemy who had broken through from his supplies." Schörner regrouped his troops on the night of April 23, 1945, scanned the seam between the 52nd and 2nd Polish Armies, and began an advance along the Spree River against Korot'yev's 48th Army Corps. The German thrust with 100 tanks hit the weakest part of the Russian-Polish grouping. Not only were the encircled towns of Bautzen and Weissenberg liberated. A large Soviet army grouping was subsequently surrounded by German troops and routed in a wooded area northeast of Weissenberg between April 24 and 26. In the process, the deputy commander of the 7th Mechanical Guard Corps, Major General Maximov, fell into German captivity. His two brigade commanders fell in vain attempts to break out.³ Schörner's objective was to impede the Red Army's >Berlin Operation* in a sustained manner by attacking the vulnerable left flank of the First Ukrainian Front. This did not succeed because the attack operation by Heinrici's 9th Army, ordered by Hitler at the same time, failed. While Hitler was led to believe that his orders were being carried out, the 9th Army instead retreated westward to the Americans, widening the gap even more. Thus, the encirclement of Berlin could no longer be averted, even though Koniev's forces were much weaker than Zhukov's.

To avert the immediate threat to the city of Berlin, General Jodl and Hitler had drawn up a strategic concept of a final battle. In addition to the attack of "Army Group Schörner< in the Saxony area, which had already begun, this also provided for the destruction of General Zhukov's northern pincer arm by a concerted action of the newly formed 12th Army under General Wenck, the 9th Army of General Busses, the units of SS General Steiner, and the Holste Panzer Corps. Together they were to destroy the Russians between Spandau and

Oranienburg. V-1 with >special charges< were to decimate Russian supplies across the Oder River near Küstrin from their launching bases at Linum, while Germany's jet fighters were massed on sites near Prague to screen relief attacks from the air. North of Hanover, Art. Reg. 901 deployed V-2 missiles for the "Blücher Mission." Nuclear charges were also to be fired against Küstrin.¹ In short, plans were made to inflict "the bloodiest defeat in their history," as Hitler optimistically put it, on Russian units already morally battered by the bloody battles on the Oder and the approaching end of the war. In this way, it was hoped to drive a wedge between the Western powers and the Soviet Union. There was indeed contact between the bunker under the Reich Chancellery in Berlin and the Swiss consulate in the Reich capital until the last days of the Battle of Berlin, with the Swiss office also liaising with the Western Allies. To the surprise of the German side, the Americans signaled "benevolent approval" of Berlin's defensive strategy. In addition, there was a growing body of testimony, such as that of a Soviet prisoner of war in the 79th Guards Rifle Division. He reported that any U.S. troops the Russians might encounter on the way to Berlin were to be forced to retreat by artillery and rocket fire.¹ This raised hopes for possible political solutions, with Hitler also considering a separate peace with Stalin after a possible victory. According to Hanns Schwarz, a former high troop commander in Berlin, he only wanted to inflict great losses in man and material on Stalin's forces beforehand; perhaps he could then even count on a continuing partition of Poland as a gain in the east, possibly also continuing to include Hungary and Croatia in the German sphere of interest. . . Whether these were only illusions or speculations of a desperate man, nobody can say today. In fact, the battle for Berlin, as planned by Hitler and Jodl, did not take place. Due in no small part to the events at Cottbus, the situation deteriorated so rapidly that Wenck's relief force was only able to liberate the city of Potsdam and advance to General Busse's 9th Army by April 28, 1945. Wenck's units had already established radio contact with the defenders of Berlin. Jet fighters also began to appear in Berlin airspace by the dozens with great success. Time was now running out for the united push on Berlin, since the Soviets were already fighting for the center of the city, but also because Generals Steiner, Holste, and Wenck had felt unable to undertake the ordered offensive to liberate the Reich capital in view of the ever-approaching end of the war. The V-1 and V-2 were dismantled again. In the bunker under the Reich Chancellery, the absence of the relief divisions was regarded as treason in view of the approaching doom. It was of no use that Field Marshal Keitel went from besieged Berlin to the generals of the relief forces on April 22 to get their attack under way. The commanders instead tried with last energy to save their troops to the Americans. That Eisenhower's Rhine meadow starvation camps would flourish there for many German prisoners of war could not have been imagined by any of these officers in their worst nightmares at the time.¹ Thus it remains unclear to this day whether there was still the possibility of a united German military success at Berlin in retrospect and what the effects on the war situation would have been.